

## FRAME OF REFERENCE

Since the 1990's, it has been clear that the notion of 'culture' has become a model with a crucial role in understanding and interpreting strategic international phenomena and changes in the aftermath of the cold war era. At the same time the concept of 'culture' has turned into an effective framework for international relations after the sudden end of the former ideological conflict and the subsequent emergence of globalisation with its multiple facets.

Two theses have come to the fore. They are opposed, though concomitant, and interrelated in terms of their internal logic: the clash of civilisations and dialogue among civilisations.

\* The clash of civilisations thesis emerged from strategic studies and theories of international relations in search of analytic tools to tackle international phenomena and changes that clearly had a cultural background. The successive crises and raging conflicts in the Islamic world and its vicinity provide an example of these.

\* The dialogue among civilisations thesis crystallised in the literature of international cultural institutions, particularly the UNESCO. The Mexico City Declaration (August 1982) on cultural policies included the notion of cultural diversity in its priorities, triggering off an entire process leading up to the UNESCO international Declaration on cultural diversity (Nov. 2001). Steps are now being taken to finalise the adoption of the international convention on protecting cultural diversity.

Many world powers, and international institutions and organizations have adopted the concept of cultural diversity and made sustaining and protecting it their strategic objective. The subject became a central concern the International Organization of French-Speaking Countries (OIF), while the Islamic Scientific, Educational and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) and the Organization of Iberian American States for Education, Science, and Culture (OEI) articulated similar aspirations.

Needless to say, the cultural dialogue motto has been visibly associated in the last four years with the repercussions and implications of the September 11th cataclysm, as it were, and has been at the core of Islamic-Western relations which have undergone real difficulties at various levels.

However, despite the considerable, diverse activities undertaken by the Arab-Islamic world on the one hand, and the Western world, on the other, the concept of dialogue among civilisations, though a prevalent motto and permanent item of international diplomacy, and a major component of the strategies and action plans of international organizations at present, is still blurred and requires further scrutiny and clarification. It is, indeed, a concept that still masks the theoretical problems and procedural difficulties that mark cultural relations between the Islamic and Western worlds.

To ward off such difficulties and identify the considerable, complex stakes associated with cultural diversity, the Arab League Educational, Cultural & Scientific Organization (ALECSO) has adopted a specific approach based on a meticulous inventory of the requirements of, and obstacles to, dialogue among cultures in theoretical and strategic terms. In parallel, ALECSO has endeavored to strengthen the position and role of Arab culture in interacting with other cultures, from a perspective inspired by the values of Arab-Islamic civilization. This vision is based on opening up to others, tolerance, and communication with different nations and cultures.

### **1) Background to Dialogue: The Strategic Framework**

Strategic studies have diverged over the issue of determining the nature and context of the post-cold war international relations. In the early 1990's, two terms gained currency then suddenly lost momentum. They are, namely, the New World Order and Unipolarity.

#### **\* The New World Order:**

This was the slogan embraced by the Bush father Administration amidst the ecstatic moment of victory in war. In the American perspective, it means replacing the old bipolar ideological conflict with a global system based on universal partnership through operationalising international institutions and legislation and entrusting the dominant world power with leading the world to such a change.

#### **\* The Unipolar System**

This system crystallised in strategic studies and was then considered as the alternative model supplanting multi-polarity after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the dismantling of the former Soviet Union.

However, the outbreak and aggravation of international crises and conflicts in many regions of the world, particularly in the Balkans, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle-East, awakened the world to the nature of the new threats to, and divisions within, the World order and laid bare three truths:

a) The shift from the conventional warfare system based on balanced deterrence to a new warfare system called unbalanced warfare, relying on inexpensive, easily transportable, mass destruction technology, which in fact largely nullified the effect of deterrent weapons;

b) The shift of confrontation lines from between to inside countries, i.e. where the belligerents are nationalities and groups sharing a cultural sphere that does not coincide with the political borders of the countries involved. Such challenges emerged in the disintegration process affecting multinational countries in the former socialist bloc (e.g. Bosnia, Kosovo, Russia, etc.), Africa, and Asia (e.g. the Congo, Indonesia, etc.).

c) The aggravation of terrorist threats rooted in religious fundamentalism: though this phenomenon has largely concerned the Islamic World, it is not confined to a specific religious community. It has also emerged in certain Christian, Jewish and Buddhist groups, and clearly poses a threat to international security at present. Such explosive atmosphere was the background to the September 11th cataclysm, when an unprecedented blow was dealt to the international centre of power and wealth. This

reveals the risks of a combination of three factors: (i) the spread of mass destruction weapons, (ii) the unbalanced warfare system, and (iii) religious fundamentalism. It calls for reflection about the unmentioned problems inherent in international strategy-making. These fall into three major categories:

- (i) Shortcomings of international legality. While this legality is based on the principle of partnership within the frame of reference of international legislation, double standards are used in dealing with international issues and crises
- (ii) Shortcomings of globalisation. While globalisation objectively consecrates the unity of world economy, harmony, and functional complementary relations between nations and countries, cultural and national differences are being exacerbated. Narrow-minded visions of identity and specificity are being used as cover while all efforts to give a cultural content to the concept of globalisation have failed.
- (iii) Increasing imbalance in the resources and standards of the developed and industrialized North, on the one hand, and those of the distressed South, on the other. This imbalance concerns such essential factors of power and development as sources of knowledge, wealth, and communication. At the same time, foreign aid to developing countries has considerably decreased, and the solutions proposed by the international development agencies and financial institutions to rescue these countries' economies from total collapse or bankruptcy have virtually failed to achieve their objective.

Clearly these three problems are related to cultural challenges, whether as regards international legality, the cultural content of globalisation, or the requirements of development, including a knowledge-based economy and a communications infrastructure.

Dialogue among cultures offers a way out of, or remedy to, these dangerous disruptions of the world order which can be summed up in a single phrase: imbalance between legality and power. This imbalance has taken dangerous paths and elicited a will among major world powers to renege on the duties and standards of international legality. This was expressed in new ambiguous concepts as ash "the duty to intervene", superseding "the right to intervene", "pre-emptive war" (outside the framework of international law), and "degraded sovereignty" (justifying intervention), alongside the fundamentalist division of the world into the axis of "good" and the axis of "evil" (which is hardly different from the aggressive categorizations of extremist groups).

## **2) Background to Dialogue: the Development Framework**

The recent literature on economic development has started highlighting the cultural factor as a basic factor of comprehensive and integrated human development. This was embodied in two major truths:

- a) An awareness that knowledge is the instrument and measure of the new economy, based on communications infrastructure and artificial intelligence
- b) A revision of the reductionist view of development as quantitative growth associated with increased wealth and production.

It has therefore become necessary to move away from the dominant unilateral concept of development founded on an imposed single model based on market logic as the key to, and determining factor in, human phenomena. This unilateral view has resulted in wild globalisation based on the following three principles:

- \* **Market power**
- \* **Corporate power**
- \* **Capital power**

Market power consists in considering the market as the only authority with self-regulatory mechanisms capable of achieving the necessary social balances for the distribution of production.

Corporate power, on the other hand, is entrusted with the organization and management of available resources to achieve the highest possible profit, innovation, and quality standards.

Finally, capital power is based on the principles of objectification (that is, the commodification of all types of material and human resources) and private ownership of all natural and human resources, considering the financial, monetary, and commercial aspects as the basis of all economic processes.

This concept of development, presented in pseudo-scientific guise, originated in a given cultural vision and a unilateral intellectual stance. It is now taken for granted that there is only one model of progress and change: that based on the contemporary method imposed by the West. Modernity has come to mean westernization. The corollary of this is that the centrality of the West, based on a unilateral, exclusive concept, has been accepted as the norm. The underlying assumption is that what is good for the West is good for mankind, and that the Western standard is, in the final analysis, a universal standard.

This view was radicalized by Western philosophical approaches, which presented modernity as a Western project to replace long-established religious thought, theocratic models and ancient traditions by a content that was, at the same time, rational, scientific, and pragmatic. The purpose of this is to dominate the world and have full control of the environment and nature and turn it into an instrument for the pursuit of human happiness.

Dynamism became the standard of the Western way of life, while decadence and stagnation prevailed in the rest of the world. Europe firmly believed that it led the world thanks with its intellectual, political, and economic influence. This cultural heritage helped establish the notions of European supremacy and Euro-centrism.

This kind of discourse provided the ideological and cultural background to development to the rest of the world, starting from the denial of development models peculiar to non-Western peoples and societies.

In reality, Western centrism bases its view of modernity on a unilateral, global approach that reduces the humanist project to mere quantitative objectives with the ultimate aim of maximizing profit and accumulating wealth through an aggressive view of nature, and a confrontational and competitive vision of human society.

This approach has resulted in devastating natural and human disasters, and widened the gap between social classes and countries. As a result, there emerged an alternative type of discourse on development, which a number of international development institutions have adopted. In essence, this discourse aims to reinstate man as the main target of development in its wide sense. This is how the importance of the cultural factor was recognized, along with the place of specific traits of civilisations in the process of modernization and development.

The basic components of this new concept of human development include:

- a) Establishing an international system of adjudication in the service of humanity, justice, and equity
- b) Giving people's rights a central place in this system by laying emphasis on the moral responsibility and accountability of all
- c) Considering the principles of human development and social protection as the pillars of international economic adjudication
- d) Ensuring people's security, especially in case of economic crisis
- e) Minimizing disruptions and violations of people's security
- f) Protecting the environment
- g) Protecting cultural diversity

Human development is by no means restricted to quantitative expansion. It is rather meant to increase the options available to men, through enabling them to exercise their basic rights and ensuring their security in areas vital to their welfare (i.e. economy, food, health, individual skills, protection, and knowledge). It also helps enhance their participation in the various civic, communal, and political processes.

It is therefore a comprehensive and integrated kind of development based on human capital and aimed at making the knowledge society the pillar of human development. This can be achieved by enhancing collective creativity and intelligence to help all individuals set up collective mechanisms of coexistence and production, within the framework of creative, plural interaction of knowledge, culture, and development. These principles were asserted in the 1998 Stockholm Declaration, which highlighted a set of central objectives, which were adopted by the international community, and provided a framework for the cultural policies of UNESCO member states. The most important objectives included:

- \* Establishing closer links between sustainable development and cultural prosperity
- \* Working for increased cultural openness and social welfare
- \* Considering cultural rights as basic human rights
- \* Considering dialogue among cultures as a basic condition of peaceful co-existence and interaction between societies and nations
- \* Considering cultural creativity as the source of human progress and cultural diversity, and an essential factor of development
- \* Upholding respect for cultural identities and tolerance within the framework of the values of freedom, pluralism, and social and economic justice

From this perspective, the motto of "dialogue among cultures" has moved from the literature of philosophical treaties and sociological publications to development studies, and become the token of performance for international bodies and organizations, and first and foremost the United Nations and its cultural subsidiary, the UNESCO.

Consistent with this perspective, the UN General Assembly adopted on 21/11/2001 a comprehensive concept of dialogue among civilisations primarily aimed at promoting a spirit of openness, tolerance, justice, and equality among humans. This concept also aims to enhance cultural interaction and hybridization, bring human value systems in line with respect for human dignity and cultural specificity, and lay down legislative and behavioral standards to protect civilizational identity and cultural diversity.

Similarly, UNESCO published on 02/11/2001 its international declaration on cultural diversity, which stressed the following:

- \* Conserving cultural diversity as a common human legacy
- \* Considering pluralism as the basic expression of the reality of cultural diversity
- \* Considering cultural diversity as a factor of development
- \* Considering human rights as a guarantee of cultural diversity.

This integrative concept of the cultural dimension as inseparable from the development process has been adopted by the UN development programme in its recent reports and publications advocating interaction and communication between civilisations.

### **3) Frame of Reference of the Arab Approach to Dialogue between Cultures:**

Dialogue among cultures is one of ALECSO's main lines of action, and strategic goals. The Charter of Arab Cultural Unity emphasizes the human mission of Arab culture and the requirements for interaction and communication with other cultures. On the other hand, the first article of ALECSO's charter makes it clear that one of the central goals of ALECSO is: "to encourage co-operation between the Arab and other nations in all areas of intellectual activity, and use such means of international co-operation as would make any material written or published by any member state available to all".

Moreover, dialogue between the Arab Culture and other cultures was a fundamental point of the Comprehensive Plan for Arab Culture, which considered that: "the continuation by Arab Culture of its time-honored, deep-rooted traditions of dialogue and co-operation, and its give-and-take policy, is but one feature of its concept of culture. A necessity dictated by modernity, it could rejuvenate and revitalize this culture, and optimize its richness, and capacity for giving. It also provides this culture with considerable opportunities to project a good image of it, with a view to fostering positive interaction between our culture and other world cultures.

This strategy put a high premium on providing favorable conditions for the success of this dialogue, based on parity, equality, and free from subservience, conquest, and appropriation. It also considered Arab cultural harmony and the internal cohesion of the national make-up of Arab culture as part of the conditions enabling Arab culture to undertake positive communication with other cultures.

Dialogue between the Arab and other cultures constituted an essential component of ALECSO's medium term policy (1997-2002) which stressed a number of objectives, the most important of which were:

- Contributing to setting up a world order based on mutual respect, and establishing relations of understanding, equality, and balance with other cultures in the world, based on mutual respect for the values and principles of each culture.
- Adopting cultural dialogue as a means of communication with the cultures of the different nations
- Emphasizing in each cultural dialogue the specificity of the Arab-Islamic identity and cultural unity of the Arab nation.

Furthermore, inter-cultural dialogue is a basic component of ALECSO's forward-looking Plan of Action (2005-2010), which provides for the objective of opening up to, and interacting with, other cultures. The plan stresses the need to continue the dialogue with all other cultural models, and use modern means of communication and knowledge to publicize Arab-Islamic culture and highlight its outstanding human dimensions within the framework of a vision that allows for complementarity with other cultures."

ALECSO has developed detailed national policies aiming at giving concrete form to the strategy of dialogue with other cultures in various sectors including the National Plan for Complementarity between the Cultural and Informational Policies in the Arab World (2001) which starts from the premise that "opening up to other cultures is indispensable. Besides, it protects the nation's culture from harmful penetration or intentional conquest by improving, varying, and renewing its sources instead of resorting to isolation and blind protectionism. With the revolution in communications and information technology, our world requires opening up to other cultures, using new concepts and means of controlling information that take account of these tasks and requirements. Moreover, the Action Plan on Cultural Policies for Development in the Arab World (2002) considers intercultural dialogue as one of the pillars of our national cultural policy. It also lays stress on cultural diversity as an effective factor in human development.

#### **4) ALECSO's View of Cultural Dialogue:**

A review of the cultural dialogue experience during the previous decade, particularly in the last four years (2001-2004), shows clearly that what characterized it was a rather idealistic approach to the objective problems on the agenda. In most cases, it was restricted to exploring the positive common denominators in the hope that such common ground could help lay the foundations of dialogue.

Such an approach was no doubt necessary at a preliminary stage to disprove the allegations of the clash of civilisations trend. However, the question has become so complex that it requires more precision and realism in analyzing intercultural relations.

This necessitates taking account of the complementarity, interpenetration, and complexity elements in this relationship. It must be viewed in its historical dynamics, from the perspective of the dialectics of mutual influence, and the alternation of conflict and concord in the different phase of its history.

Thus, ALECSO's philosophy of cultural dialogue stems from the reality of the interaction between cultures, both in their clash and communication dimensions. Underlying it is an objective view of the history of this relationship in its entirety and dialectical dynamics, free from fear or apprehension. Based on this, ALECSO starts from the following fundamental assumptions:

1. Intercultural dialogue is an international strategic necessity at a time in history when culture has become an analytic model for international relations and a key to its management and internal balance. In this context, the importance of dialogue stems from an awareness of the role of culture in making the societal and ideological choices that constitute the specificity of nations and countries. This enables it to play either a positive role in consecrating the values of communication and openness, or a negative role in heightening trend towards narrow-minded specificity, closure, and exclusionist identities.

However, this dialogue can only become effective if it relies on an accurate and objective understanding of the reality of cultural diversity as an objective basis for the plurality of cultural and social models. This understanding should replace mono-cultural streaks that ambiguously pervade many channels. Some of these pertain to international laws and treaties. Others have to do with the running of international institutions by a limited number of superpowers. For this purpose, it is imperative to set down the procedural mechanisms and practical measures to lay the foundations of a model of international partnership within the framework of cultural diversity.

2. Cultural dialogue commonsensically requires parity and equality, that is to say the belief held among the dialoguing parties in the other's right for a specific identity, precluding prejudice, and free from mythologizing, weird, superficial decisions, and purely imagined misrepresentations of the other.

In this respect, it is necessary to reject the racist claim of cultural superiority, a real obstacle to the desired dialogue. It is also imperative to be wary of certain cultural phenomena that impede dialogue, such as cloning cultures, submitting a given culture to a hegemonic ideology, and allowing one culture to take precedence over, and be detrimental to, other cultures or civilisations. All of these negative phenomena seriously hamper real dialogue which should stem from two major premises: Giving the other an equal right to take part in the debate and managing this dialogue on the basis of argumentation, not violence, or dominance.

3. The right to specificity and difference should not be used as a pretext for rejecting universal human values, or legitimizing violations of human dignity and human rights. Otherwise, it would contradict the basic moral principle of the right to diversity and plurality, i.e. the principle of equality. It is necessary to take into consideration the living dynamic dimension of cultural specificity as the product of living historical experience and the outcome of a constant process of cultural interpenetration and hybridization.

Thus, no successful cultural dialogue can avoid problems related to the value system common to contemporary humanity. The numerous on-going attempts to

formulate these systems cannot be legitimate or comprehensive unless they are based on wide-ranging sharing of minds between the different cultural and civilizational spaces on the world scene. In fact, all great cultural systems, whatever their degree of specificity, are full of universal values, and constitute rich and diverse sources of common human wisdom. They should therefore be used for the elaboration of standards of universal value for what has come to be known as Global Human Civilization.

4. Globalisation is an inevitable objective reality and a historical dynamic. It is not an absolute evil. Rather, it has permitted the different parts of the world to come closer and has increased the chances for communication and meeting among people. One of the priorities of the desired cultural dialogue should be to remedy the flaws in globalisation by curbing its wild aspects and putting an end to its interference whose means is the use of force, whose objective is quick profit, and whose method is cultural unilateralism; it calls for subscribing to conformity, loss of identity and subjugation. Conversely, we should seek to maximize the benefits derived from its considerable potential for improved communication between the various cultural spaces.

5. Arab-Islamic culture, facing nowadays a vicious, unfair adverse campaign that misrepresents it as the breeding ground of intolerance, fanaticism, and aggressiveness, abounds with the values of openness, tolerance, respect for the other and pluralism. This should enable it, in the context of international change and new challenges, and in view of its historical heritage, to play a positive role in improving dialogue among nations and peoples and brokering understanding and peace in the world.

Therefore, Arab culture, which has absorbed the common human legacy of the civilisations of Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt, Phoenicia, Greece, and Rome, is equally capable of assimilating the treasures of the diverse civilizational fabric of humanity today. It is a culture that is based on a global approach, and rejects, like the other cultures, all forms of hegemony and stereotyping. It also strongly rejects any kind of unilateral *fait accompli* and unilateral policies.

However, this conception does not justify pride, and the superiority complex that leads to a nullification of history, and an immutable attachment to the past. Such categorical, dogmatic attitudes may pervade our perception of our own civilization, which is for the most part selective, glorifying. This perception is indeed a-historical for it implies rejecting historical relativity and dialectics while unwarrantably sticking to a dubious absolute principle.

This haughty centralizing attitude reduces our ability to communicate with other cultures and weakens our position in a dialogue that requires parity and equality, that is to say the right to cultural hybridization, freedom of cultural innovation, and the rejuvenation of one's identity within the framework of well-known permanent national and civilizational traits.

6. Dialogue among religions is one of the pillars of intercultural dialogue. This is because religion has a pivotal role in shaping civilisations and behavioral and societal choices. At a time when people are yearning for spirituality, there is need for places where religions can meet and communicate with one another. Prior to that, religious

practice has to be well regulated inside societies. This is particularly true of expatriate Islamic communities. The societies that host these communities must provide respectable places of worship to facilitate the integration of religion and keep it away from the violence and tension of the destructive trends that use religion for their own agendas.

Extremism, allegedly Islamic, does not represent an aspect of Islamic civilization. It is a doctrinal and ideological perversion whose aggression has mostly affected Arab and Islamic countries. Moreover, this phenomenon is not restricted to the Islamic religion.

The same aggressive fundamentalist tendencies are on the rise within the major religions, to such an extent that some of these tendencies are represented in key positions, and exert effective influence on decision-making (as attested by Jewish fundamentalism in Israel and Christian fundamentalism in the USA).

For this reason, dialogue among religions should not be turned into putting Islam on trial. Instead, it should seek to establish a religious alliance against fanaticism, extremism, and violence (in line with the project submitted by the Spanish Premier when he called for an Islamic-Christian alliance).

7. The linguistic picture is one of the main entries to be tackled when engaging in intercultural and inter-civilizational dialogue. The state of the art reveals a disturbing imbalance, with some languages dominating the scene and other languages threatened with extinction, notwithstanding their historical role in building Human civilization.

Such languages presently need as much recognition of their role as they need protection and special care. This is particularly true given that twenty-five languages out of the total five thousand languages used in the world are doomed to extinction every year. The call for linguistic pluralism is tantamount to a call for multiculturalism and a plurality of perspectives and outlooks in interacting with the other. It is a call for the emergence of innovative patterns that might cumulatively contribute to the stupendous flow of human creativity.

8. Education is essential for approaching inter-civilizational dialogue and setting it on a sound basis. It is therefore necessary to include the concepts and implications of religious, cultural, and linguistic dialogue in the curricula and educational models with a view to sensitizing young learners to the importance of the creative contributions of all peoples and nations. In addition, young people must be instilled with the principles of co-operation, solidarity, and complementarity, and encouraged to diversify their acquired knowledge about the cultures, languages, religions, and specificities of other peoples. This necessitates radical educational reform based on training young learners to seek information about their extended human environment, tolerate the presence of the other, and be ready to co-exist with them and respect their specificity despite their difference. This also requires a revision of textbooks to weed out any prejudices against other cultures, or signs of high-handedness or demeaning reference to the other. The subject of comparative religion should be introduced as part of the curriculum to strike at the roots of religious fundamentalism and bigotry. From this perspective, education is

a means of protection against all sorts of fanatic deviation and a kind of vaccine with long-term effects against the pitfalls of extremism and terrorism.

ALECSO's view of intercultural dialogue is therefore based on an objective critical reading of the problems of interaction between cultures in their communicative and confrontational dimensions. Our ultimate aim is to depict the real picture that would enable us to select the best ways of achieving relations of rapprochement, co-operation, partnership, and exchange of expertise. Through this critical reading, we seek to spark off the process of turning intercultural relations into a lived, progressive experience leading to a realistic apprehension of reality with all its complexities and contradictions, rather than relying on idealistic theories and good intentions. From this spark, a true partnership will arise, based on shared values and mutual interests. This will involve total awareness of what this relationship carries in terms of rapprochement and difference, and their complex, positive, and negative effects.

It transpires, then, that intercultural dialogue will remain a foggy slogan used for diplomatic protocol and intellectual luxury unless it is based on a critical, objective vision, and total candour, and supported by some practical mechanisms that will translate into fact, within the framework of peer partnership, and the right to cultural diversity, without renegeing on universal human values.